

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 1989

IN MEMORIAM

Dr. B. P. Pal

1906 – 1989

M. S. Viraraghavan

*'The gate of life swings to and fro,
Soon, too soon, it closes,
And that is why, beside my door,
I grow red roses'*

Rose lovers in India and elsewhere were greatly saddened by the passing away of Dr. B. P. Pal on 14th September 1989. The end came after a fall on the staircase in his house, which he must have used safely so often in the past, on his way to his beloved terrace rose garden, adjoining his upstairs bedroom.

Those of us who were privileged to know him over a period of years might have felt a sudden chill - your Editor certainly did - when Dr. Pal closed his article in our Rose Annual VI with the quotation given above. But rosarians are incurable optimists, and the thought was soon dismissed. But by hindsight we could perhaps say that Dr. Pal himself had felt that the end was near.

Dr. Pal was a man of varied accomplishments - one of India's most eminent agricultural scientists, endowed with the uncommon gift of translating scientific ideas into practical action, as well as unusually gifted in his sensitivity to men and matters, to which was added an innate but striking feel for beauty.

But we are here primarily concerned with Dr. Pal and the rose - his other accomplishments are detailed elsewhere in this Annual, in the I.R.F. citation prepared on the occasion of presenting him with the Vijay Pokarna Gold Medal in December 1988.

As a young man keenly in love with roses, I remember visiting Dr. Pal's Rose Garden in the Indian Agriculture Research Institute, well over 30 years ago. It was early spring of Delhi and everywhere the roses were in bloom - roses as bushes, as climbers, and, most eyecatching of all, as standard roses underplanted with bright blue pansies, with that loving eye for detail so characteristic of him; Dr. Pal. while looking at his roses, was obviously keenly enjoying the scene, yet there was at the same time a somewhat puzzling but manifest glow, even when he was not apparently looking at the flowers. Over the years I have come to realize that this was occasioned by a lovely mental vision of roses, which must have been present most of the time. Even in later years, when reduced to growing roses in a small terrace on the upstairs of his modest post-retirement house, he would always make it a point to show visitors around - even during the height of summer when there were no flowers at all. Obviously he expected those with him to have that same vivid mental picture of roses to come.

Indian rose lovers were indeed most fortunate that Dr. Pal became Director of the I.A.R.I. at a critical phase just after Independence. Largely owing to his initiative and the life-long love for roses - he had been growing roses even as a young boy in Burma - he was instrumental in starting the Department of Horticulture, later Floriculture. Mind you, this was done at a time when rose growing, or for that matter, flower growing, was considered elitist - it still is, to some extent, forgetting the compelling truth that a flower is the simplest, and therefore, the purest symbol of love or reverence available to even the humblest.

A second pioneering achievement of Dr. Pal was the starting of the Rose Society of India, which has done so much to popularize rose growing in the country.

In a way, more important than the contribution of the I.A.R.I. to rose research, were Dr. Pal's personal efforts at an amateur level. I cannot resist borrowing Jack Harkness's apt description of another rose breeder - Alec Cocker, and applying it to Dr. Pal - as a person "whose heart was wrapped up, strung, knotted and posted off to the Goddess of New Roses". He himself had stated, with becoming modesty, that his rose breeding was with a view to raise roses better suited for areas like Delhi.

But we should not forget that Dr. Pal as a rose breeder represented an unique combination of an agricultural scientist with a background of many years in plant breeding, a lover of roses with a critical appreciation of the beauty of the rose developed over the years, as well as an artist endowed with an uncommon sensitivity to form and colour. The roses raised by him, besides setting a new standard in Indian bred roses, are a clear pointer to what is possible in the future, when, hopefully, roses raised in India will dominate the show benches - as they ought to.

Remarkably enough, though roses were a kind of religion with him, Dr. Pal would never allow intensity of feeling to upset his equanimity and balance. An object lesson in these days of abrasive sanctimoniousness, was his handling of the provocative and unnecessary references to the working of the Rose Society of India, which must have hurt him deeply, during a meeting at Bombay, by his hosts who seemed oblivious that the success of the occasion was largely due to his presence.

His unflappable graciousness concealed a painstaking and meticulous attention to every detail concerning the rose, forgetting physical limitations. I still remember judging roses with him during the Winter Show of the Rose Society of India in December 1988 when, despite obviously not being well, he insisted on closely inspecting each and every exhibit, displaying a patience which could not be matched by those much younger than him.

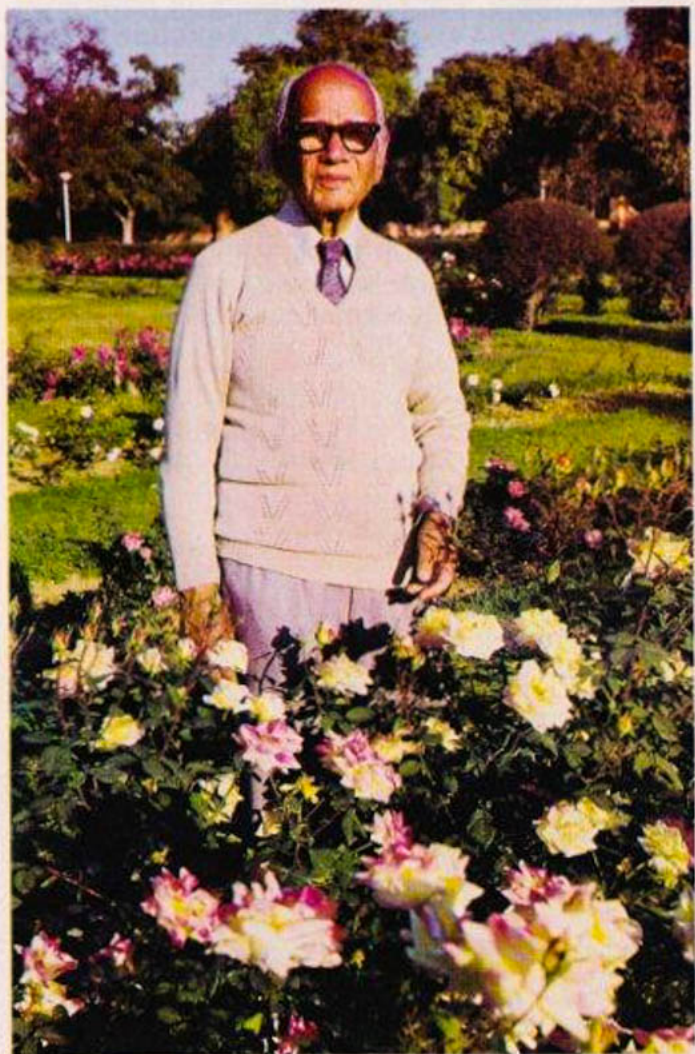
I met him for the last time at the end of July this year (1989) and he discussed many things, including the publication of the new edition of his "Rose in India". I could see that he was worried by the long delay with the printer (he had completed his work of revision long back) and by the loss of certain important photographs, but was still cheerful, taking the setback in his stride and dismissing the subject which must have been very close to his heart with the light remark 'the book may yet be published by the year end'. He talked with enthusiasm of his newest roses – C.V. Raman, Dr. M.S. Randhawa, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mrs K. B. Sharma (named after the wife of an old friend) and how the rose C. V. Raman had been specially selected by him to commemorate the centenary of that

great scientist. (Photographs of three of these roses appear in this Annual). ,

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Copies of the original

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Dr. B. P. Pal among his beloved roses

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C. V. Raman - H.T. B. P. Pal
SCARLET KNIGHT x FIRST PRIZE
Released on the occasion of Sir C. V. Raman's birth centenary.